

THE INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE

Martin H. Scharlemann

In this paper I propose to defend the paradox that the Book of God's truth contains errors. What is more, I hope to show that by the proper resolution of this paradox we in fact magnify the truth that comes to us by divine revelation. What is set forth here is necessarily devoted to what is called "the human side" of that revelation.

Allow me to add that I have volunteered for this task, not with any particular relish, but on the conviction that the time has come to take a long look at one of the sub-headings under the locus, De Scriptura. My own feeling in the matter is that this kind of undertaking is part of our task—possibly even part of our cross—as persons belonging to the faculty of this Seminary. Such a responsibility makes our position less comfortable than we might like it to be. Yet I should like to suggest that only by thoroughly discussing such subjects as may admittedly touch on very sensitive areas do we fully exercise our office as teachers of the church.

Even on the personal level we are to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord. Precisely this kind of maturing could be the outcome of the present discussions. In fact, it has been and continues to be my prayer that this will be the end-result of what is read and said on the subject under fire. For I am fully persuaded that some serious reflection on the human factors in the process we know as revelation will only increase our appreciation of God's condescending grace. For in all this, the real question lies deeper than the mere supposition that God has preserved the Biblical writers from all erroneous statements. The real question is, as Dr. Sasse has pointed out in his paper Sacra Scriptura, "How does the Word of God come to us in Holy Scripture, and how is this Word of God to be distinguished from the words of men?" It is this question which has created a deep crisis in all

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Christianity. We can avoid facing this question only at the peril of our own professional competence and integrity.

At our fall retreat President Fuerbringer assured me that the document we know as the Brief Statement was originally designed to be a piece of "Besprechungs-theologie." As things went, it did not really get much serious scrutiny, mostly because many things were assumed to have been permanently fixed and formulated which, in fact, can never be expressed absolutely in any language. Possibly, therefore, you will not misunderstand me when I say that I want to direct myself to that sentence in the first paragraph of the Brief Statement which reads:

"Since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters, John 10,35."

I for one cannot bring myself to the point of believing that this sentence was explored in all of its dimensions before it was adopted. If it had been, I should have to think less of those who taught us than I want to. At the same time I entertain the hope that this sentence could not, in the wording quoted, pass this faculty today, or, if it did, that the terms "truth," "error," "contradiction," and "historical" would receive some very careful and limiting definitions. For, as the statement reads, it is a pure rationalization, built on the assumption that our Scriptures are, like the Book of Mormon, a gift that fell straight from heaven, when, in fact, it is the book of the people of God, with all that such a statement implies.

I have quoted this particular sentence from the Brief Statement because it rather accurately describes what usually passes for inerrancy in our circles. Putting it more specifically, inerrancy is understood to mean: 1) that the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, the Books of Samuel and Kings, Chronicles and even the Gospels offer us genuine history; 2) that these accounts are historically accurate in every

detail; and 3) that any secular matters described or alluded to contain no errors in fact.

Of course, there has been some adjustment on this last point. We no longer insist on the geocentric view of the world that the Biblical authors assume. We do not take the account of Joshua making the sun and the moon to stand still in its literal meaning; for, in the face of overwhelming evidence, we have been driven to the conclusion that this portion of the Scriptures does not propose to speak in scientifically accurate language. In passing, though, it should be noted that it was one of our pastors who wrote a book the thesis of which, roughly put, was this: The Scriptures depend for their veracity and reliability on taking their statements literally; the Joshua story tells us that the sun and the moon stood still; therefore no Christian can accept the Copernican theory. I am referring to Friederich Pasche's Christliche Weltanschauung, as published by the Germania Company of Milwaukee in 1904.

We would, I am sure, hardly accept such a conclusion today. We allow for the possibility that the Biblical statement need not be taken literally. Incidentally, we have been willing to do this because of the volume of evidence from sources outside the Scriptures. We are quite ready to say at this point that the Biblical writer used language which he and his contemporaries believed to be accurate. In other words, we admit that he spoke to the people of his time in their language and according to their "Weltanschauung." Here is the nub of the matter under discussion.

The observation that the decisive issue in the question under discussion is the outlook of the author and his immediate readers can and must be extended to include other areas, even matters of historical detail. For the Bible must be understood as proposing to communicate, in the first instance, to people who did not only use languages that are foreign to us, but who also viewed life differently from us. For that reason an insistence on inerrancy, as that concept is usually understood in our church, does in fact---

I. MAKE OF THE BIBLE SOMETHING LESS THAN WHAT IT PROPOSES TO BE

For one thing, this notion of inerrancy is bound to a single-surface view of the text of Scripture. That is to say, the Scriptures are looked upon as having been produced by a single act of inspiration in each author and created by one grand sweep of the sacred author's pen. All of the statements that ours is not a mechanical view of inspiration to the contrary notwithstanding, the average pastor teaches the Bible as though it were inspired just in this way. This way of teaching continues all the way through our prep schools. I make bold to say this because I have seen what a shock it is to our second year men in Hermeneutics to discover that there are, most likely, several layers under the present Biblical documents; namely, those of oral tradition and of other documents.

Such a view makes of the Bible less than what it proposes to be; for the Scriptures are in a real way the book of the people of God, into which has been poured their response to God's mighty acts of revelation. We reduce the sweep of the Biblical account when we fail to consider the activity, for example, of the story-teller in ancient Israel as a source of the materials found in our sacred Scriptures.

Let us take the Book of Judges as an example of this aspect of revelation. How did this book come into being? We do not know who wrote it; nor does that detract from its authority. (This, by the way, is a wholesome principle of our theology: that the authority of a Biblical document does not depend on its authorship). Now, how did this unknown writer go about his task? He has a truth to convey, which certainly came to him by what we would call revelation. The truth was this: Obedience to God assures the prosperity of a nation; idolatry incurs the wrath of God in the form of enemy invasion and occupation; Yahweh, however, is faithful to His covenant and for that reason raises up liberators when people repent. This was his insight into the meaning of the particular historical situation in which Israel found itself. This concern governs the composition of the book. To point up this truth, the author selects the traditional stories about

Israel's heroes that circulated among the people. These stories were believed by the people as the story tellers related them, even though they were embellished in the telling by the kind of hyperbole that is characteristic of this kind of literary genre. What point would there have been, therefore, in checking all the details? For the writer and for his readers these stories were fully true. The author of Judges, therefore, used them as he found them in order to convey a divine truth. The history that results is paradigmatic of God's concern for His people. To insist on the inerrancy of the written account, as though it were a precise and orderly chronicling of events, is to reduce the Scripture to less than what it proposes to be in terms of its origins. *A*

Our usual view of inerrancy, moreover, overlooks one whole side of revelation. It obscures the fact that God revealed Himself primarily in mighty acts. These acts preceded the inspired account that we have of them. The Exodus occurred and Jesus rose from the dead before these acts were recorded. In other words, the revealing acts were there before the report that describes and interprets them for us. These manifestations of power are primary in the sense that historic events were the stuff God used to make known the strength of His arm.

Now, this very fundamental consideration is blurred, if not entirely obliterated, by that view of inerrancy which is concerned almost exclusively with the verbal side of Biblical revelation. As a consequence the unity of the Scriptures is often assumed to consist in little more than a verbal correspondence between certain Old Testament passages and their counterpart in the New Testament. This is the outlook that insists on almah in Isaiah 7,14 as having to mean "virgin" and nothing less. Now, this approach certainly stunts the message of the Bible. For the unity of the testaments consists in their common description of all the bother God went to in order to re-establish Himself as king over rebellious mankind. Accordingly, the whole of Israel's history and experience, both of God's ancient people and of His church, is embodied in our Lord as the true Israel, standing at the very center of history itself.

Proceeding now to a further consideration of the concept of inerrancy, we need to keep in mind that it is a modern heresy to identify truth with fact. This is one of the consequences of the discovery and wholesale application of the scientific method, as Michael Roberts has shown in his book, The Modern Mind. Behind this identification is a rather materialistic view of truth, which ultimately derives from Aristotle, was mediated through the thought of the Scholastics into early physics and passed from there, through Hobbes, into the rationalistic period of the subsequent age. But the Bible is quite innocent of this tendency and freely speaks of spiritual reality in symbolic terms. We shall return to this point at some length a little later. However, in passing it might be noted that what we mean when we say that language is symbolic is that it relates to its object in a different way from empirical language, which has become the norm in our culture and has raised the question of inerrancy as we confront it. Symbolic language makes the object no less true. On the contrary, such language can often be used to communicate truth more effectively.

Let me illustrate. Each year the planetarium in Chicago announces a lecture on the Christmas Star. In this talk all of the astronomical data that might possibly explain this unusual phenomenon are introduced. It is all very factual; and yet not an ounce of any truth that really matters gets through. Or, let us try another approach in an attempt to point out that a symbolic statement contains more truth than a factual account.

The rabbis attach to Psalm 139,3 ("Thou winnowest my path") this interpretation: At the time a human being is conceived, the angel of conception takes a drop of the human seed and, in response to a divine command, scatters it in 365 parts on the "threshing floor." God then decides the fate of the individual, whether he shall be male or female, weak, or strong, poor or rich, short or tall, etc. Our modern scientific jargon would limit itself to a discussion of chromosomes and genes and their more than 16,000,000 possible different combinations. Now, when all is said

and done, which statement conveys the truth that God is our Creator? Certainly not the scientific account dealing with genes and chromosomes. That stops short of the dimension of meaning. In this instance, there is no fact of any kind in the rabbinic story; and yet it conveys a very important truth most effectively.

St. Paul does this very thing in 1 Corinthians 10,⁴ when he says of the Israelites in the desert, "For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ." Here he uses a rabbinic legend about a rock that followed Israel wherever it wandered. It contains a minimum of fact and yet conveys a significant divine truth. An insistence, therefore, that truth must be factual would have to believe that there was such a moving rock, even though the Old Testament nowhere describes such a phenomenon.

This illustration, involving the use of a legend, leads us over to our second major consideration, namely, that a determined stand for inerrancy

II. OVERLOOKS THE USE OF LITERARY FORM IN THE PROCESS OF REVELATION

We have something of a parallel here to developments in the field of grammar. The language of the New Testament was once thought to be a specially designed "holy jargon." In fact, a Gutachten from the University of Wittenberg during the seventeenth century boldly declares that there can be no anacolutha or solecisms in the New Testament, because it is divinely inspired. The discovery of the papyri put an end to the view that what we have in the New Testament is a special language of the Holy Ghost. It became only too obvious that the language used by evangelists and apostles was that of everyday life. We are grateful for what outside sources have contributed to our understanding of individual words and grammatical constructions in the sacred records. We do not hesitate to consult these secular sources and would not dream of insisting that any grammatical question in the New Testament could be answered only in the light of what is contained in the Scriptures themselves.

Much the same sort of thing has occurred in the area of literary forms. Prof.

Pritchard of the University of Pennsylvania has given us a collection of ancient Middle Eastern texts, where we can see how literary forms were used to communicate what other civilizations conceived to be the truth. Why should the literature of Israel be any different from this in form? The contents are unique, to be sure. Yet the forms used to convey the Biblical revelation of Yahweh as the lord of nature and of history differ no more from their extra-Biblical counterparts than the language of the New Testament varies from the koine of its day.

There is, for instance, what we might call the epic form. This tends to exaggerate events. It contains hyperbole in the grand manner. Now, we don't get upset when St. Mark uses hyperbole in his first chapter, where he says about John the Baptizer, "And there went out to him all the country of Judaea, and all the people of Jerusalem." We have sufficient evidence in the other gospels to know that not all of Judaea and not all of the people of Jerusalem went out to hear John. In essence such an exaggeration as you find in Mark is no different from the "beefed up" accounts of the Exodus event. I have in mind particularly the statement that 600,000 Israelites left Egypt all at one time. To insist here on precision in fact is to miss the whole point of the literary form, whose purpose is to magnify God for His great power.

A particularly extreme example of this kind of inaccuracy in another context is found at 2 Chronicles 13,17, where we read, "And Abijah and his people slew them with a great slaughter: so there fell down slain of Israel five hundred thousand chosen men." Now, any one acquainted with what we have of population statistics from the ancient world and any one familiar with sizes of armies in proportion to total populations can only conclude that this is hyperbole of the first magnitude. As a matter of fact, it might almost be put down as a general principle that only occasionally are numbers used with great precision in the Scriptures, even outside apocalyptic literature. For, mind you, this is as many dead as America lost during all of World War II.

Even the years given for the reign of various kings must at times be seen from this side. I owe this particular insight to our own Dr. Mueller, who once pointed out to me that the many references to a forty-year rule ought, most likely, to be understood symbolically. Forty seems to stand for the full complement of years allotted by divine decision to certain kings in Israel.

Now, certainly God could have given us the verbal side of revelation in bald prose. In our day He probably would have. But we do not live in Bible times, when there was no such agonizing concern for precision in fact.

But to proceed! An insistence on the inerrancy of Scripture--and this is my third major point--

III. OVER-SIMPLIFIES THE WHOLE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION

We have already touched upon this matter very briefly. Now, however, we want to spend a little time on certain aspects of the function of language in the process of communication.

We talk about following the line of an argument. This is the linear process of reasoning as expressed, for instance, in algebraic formulas. We use the expression breadth of knowledge when we talk about substance and content in the items of a linear process. But we also use the term depth of thought. Here we are in the area of insight, intuition, revelation. This is where we find the use of poetry, art, the tale, and, if you wish, myth.

The scientific method by definition limits itself to the first two dimensions. Concern for depth is outside its sphere. Science practices a deliberate isolation from the dimension of total existence; its use of language, therefore, is ascetic. An astronomer can gather volumes of data on the movement of heavenly bodies; but his science will not give him the insights of Psalm 19. Now, the question of inerrancy arises only in this two-dimensional view of the world. Life, however, comes in at least three dimensions; and the Scriptural revelation proposes to communicate to the whole of life. Even to raise the question of inerrancy resembles

the efforts of a geometer trying to squeeze a cube into a square.

The third dimension has its own kind of language. This we tend to overlook in our familiarity with it. Yet we should be aware of the fact that since the Renaissance a process of discrimination in language has been under way, and that language becomes more precise as the decades roll by. Before the modern era little thought was given to levels in language. Books on astrology and alchemy from the Middle Ages, for example, make an indiscriminate use of language which can only annoy the scientific mind of our day. Theological, mythical and quasi-scientific language are found in the same paragraph and even in the same sentence as though they were all the same in their usage.

We might observe at this point that science did not move ahead until it stripped itself of mythical and even theological language. Astronomy, for example, had to rid itself of the depth factor in order to become the elaborate and detailed science of today. But as such it is always a construct. It does not speak to all of life and existence. It has broken the wholeness of language that we find in Scripture. It resembles the Mercator maps we got used to in our school geographies and believed to be reasonably accurate until the dawn of the air age. Now, the question of inerrancy has validity only in the area of the limited interests of the scientific method. It cannot properly be applied to the depth dimension of life and language.

For that reason Bultmann can quite rightly say that the only historical statement in the Apostles' Creed is the sentence, "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried." The rest of the Creed uses a different kind of language, from the third dimension of life, from the level of revelation and not necessarily of factuality. This does not mean that Christ did not rise from the dead, or ascend into heaven. But it does imply that you cannot apply the yardstick of historical language to these professions of our faith; for the evidence

was not revealed to any one outside the circle of Jesus' disciples.

We have a good example of the indiscriminate use of language in the opening verse of Isaiah 6, which says, "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple." The first part is straight factual language; to it the measure of inerrancy can be applied. The rest of the verse, however, defies such measurement. It describes an experience in depth, in the dimension of divine revelation.

Add to this the fact that our Western way of thinking is quite different from that of the Oriental mind. We like to measure all things by the yardstick of our intellect and make a fetish of material fact. The Oriental, on the contrary, has a concrete, living and existentialist notion of truth. Truth for him is not the clearly defined idea, the logical sequence of thought, or the accurately measured report. For him truth is a matter of life. It consists in the uprightness of a living relationship between persons, a matter to which both the Hebrew emeth and the Biblical use of aleetheia bear ample testimony.

We ask, therefore, how does one communicate the truth to people who, unlike us, are concerned with the concrete, with the whole of existence? Not by factual precision, not by statements that must of necessity be inerrant, but by the kind of language that is derived from the third dimension of life. To this is sometimes applied the term "myth," whereby man perceives the dramatic character of his situation in existence. Applying this to the Biblical revelation, it is that concrete language which appertains to our personal relationship with God, Who seeks to communicate Himself to us.

The Biblical revelation is given on an "I-Thou" basis, to borrow an expression from Martin Buber. What we have in the Bible is not only information about God but a communication of God Himself to us in a dramatic situation calling for our response. This is inherent in both the Hebrew and the Greek terms used for knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ, Whom He has sent.

To talk about inerrancy in this kind of communication is to reduce the Bible to less than it proposes to be. In fact, the question has come up only because revelation itself has often been understood as meaning no more than the disclosure of right propositions about God.

All this has some very practical import for our own task of communicating God's revelation to our generation. One of the first tasks we face when we are dealing with a secular man is to persuade him that there is a level of life beyond factual and verifiable data. It is just this that makes the preaching of the Gospel more difficult today than ever before. This is why Christian education is a more crucial need today than in previous generations; for the very kind of language and literature in which Biblical truth comes to us from God via the Scriptures is unfamiliar to the man of the twentieth century. He does not have the intellectual structure to which divine truth can direct itself and be understood. In a way, this is my greatest practical concern in this whole discussion on inerrancy. For the question is strictly a diversion. I don't want our graduates to be fighting the battles of God on the wrong fronts. And that's what happens when we fail to make the distinctions in language suggested in this paper.

Let us illustrate the language of truth from the Scriptures. The greatest of God's ancient acts was surely the Exodus. In fact, the whole Old Testament has to be read from this point of view—even backwards toward Genesis. What we seem to have in Genesis are those strands of history which bear out the truth that the God of Israel is also the Lord of the world.

But these events in history—the saving of Noah, the choice of Abraham, and the rest of it—as we read of them in our Scriptures meet us in forms that were, quite possibly, fixed in the process of oral transmission. And so these accounts have an epic and even legendary flavor. They propose to communicate truth by using these particular literary vehicles.

Beyond Noah are the accounts of creation and the fall. What shall we make of

them? This is the area, I would suggest, where the dimension of the symbolic (or mythical, if you wish) bulks large. We may view these accounts in four different ways:

1. By clinging to the factual character of the story, in spite of all difficulties, which are even greater than those that attach to the story of Joshua making the sun and the moon to stand still.
2. To call it a "myth" in the sense of the liberals, who dismissed the whole story as patently untrue.
3. To say that the story is a true and inspired "parable" of man's actual condition. This is the way of neo-orthodoxy.
4. To say that it describes the historical truth, and that the writer intended it to do just that. He wrote it as a tale, as a poetic piece, to set forth the truth of that which he believed to have happened, using materials available to him from storytellers or from written documents. That is to say, these accounts propose to speak of real events describing man's creation and fall as well as the making of his world, but in language that is largely symbolical, or mythical, and is to be so understood—even as Luther saw that God's "right hand" really means "everywhere."

As for myself I am committed to this last view, because it alone seems to ring true to the Biblical process of revelation as consisting of God communicating of Himself to us in our total being and existence. In fact, I would view the first approach—the literalistic one—as an exceedingly subtle stratagem sometimes employed by the Evil One to get us out on detours such as, "Where did the light come from on the first three days? Were the days really twenty-four hours-days?" For if we can be kept busy with that kind of question, we can escape the need for facing up to the claims of God as our Creator.

According to this fourth option, Israel must be viewed in a very profound sense as the instrument of God's ancient revelation. For it was there that these truths were made known by means of the literary forms suggested and in the kind of language we have discussed. This means that what we have in the Biblical accounts of the Old Testament is a description of Israel's faith and the inspired testimony to its truthfulness. This is surely the meaning of the Psalm, "He made

known his ways unto Moses, his acts unto the children of Israel." (Psalm 103,7)

If this should bother us, let me point to the fact that the Gospels in the New Testament are documents of the same kind. Their very form bears witness to the faith of the respective evangelist and of the church.

This is one of the factors to be reckoned with in accounting for the differences in the structure of the four gospel accounts. The evangelists did not propose to write a life of Jesus. They set out to present Him as the Messiah, each from his own point of view. Each one chose to use those materials that best served this over-arching purpose and in a way that most effectively presented the case. For Matthew, Jesus is the great fulfiller of the Old Testament. He is the Son of Man in Mark. Luke describes Him as the universal Savior, and John presents Him as the Logos. What they tell us is nothing less than God's truth. But that truth comes to us not just in bald prose or in essay form. It is revealed in the diverse language of total existence and in the literary forms best adapted to convey truth to the men of a former age.

Now, one might ask at this point, Where does all this stop? Where can we draw the line? In the first place, we must repeat that the Scriptures themselves know of no such line. It is we, of our age, who clamor for a precise rule of thumb. To meet that cry, let us say, first of all, that we can, in our own categories, distinguish between facts that matter and those that do not. To Matthew 27,9—the reference to Jeremiah rather than to Zechariah—Luther says, "What does it matter if he (Matthew) does not give the name exactly?" The same could be said of the reference to Abiathar, rather than Abimelech, at Mark 2,26.

But it does matter whether there was or was not an Exodus or a resurrection. The existence of Israel and of the church provides one kind of evidence for both events. And I am wondering whether Luther himself hasn't provided us with a clue to this difficult side of our problem by insisting on a Christological principle of interpretation. Christ is the punctus mathematicus ~~sacrae~~ Scripturae. (W.A. Tr.

2. 439 [2383/). All Scriptures turn about Him as their true center. In actual execution the principle would need to be enlarged to include the story of Israel as prefiguring the life, experience, suffering and death of our Lord as the true Israel.

Hermeneutically speaking, most of what we have tried to say means, as Dr. Franzmann keeps on reminding us in other contexts, that in order to understand the Scriptures we do not bring the documents to us, we go back to the records to see them in the light of the times in which they were written. If we do this we shall discover that the question of inerrancy is quite out of keeping with the nature of Biblical revelation. What is more, we shall experience the exhilaration that comes from being delivered from the chains of an unnecessary obscurantism. Deus nobis iuvat!

Prepared for a faculty discussion on February 25, 1958.

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Allow me to add that I have volunteered for this task, not with any particular relish, but on the conviction that the time has come to take a long look at one of the sub-headings under the locus, De Scriptura. My own feeling in the matter is that this kind of undertaking is part of our task—possibly even part of our cross—as persons belonging to the faculty of this Seminary. Such a responsibility makes our position less comfortable than we might like it to be. Yet I should like to suggest that only by thoroughly discussing such subjects as may admittedly touch on very sensitive areas do we fully exercise our office as teachers of the church.

Even on the personal level we are to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord. Precisely this kind of maturing could be the outcome of the present discussions. In fact, it has been and continues to be my prayer that this will be the end-result of what is read and said on the subject under fire. For I am fully persuaded that some serious reflection on the human factors in the process we know as revelation will only increase our appreciation of God's condescending grace. For in all this, the real question lies deeper than the mere supposition that God has preserved the Biblical writers from all erroneous statements. The real question is, as Dr. Sasse has pointed out in his paper Sacra Scriptura, "How does the Word of God come to us in Holy Scripture, and how is this. Word of God to be distinguished from the words of men?" It is this question which has created a deep crisis in all

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I. MAKE OF THE BIBLE SOMETHING LESS THAN WHAT IT PROPOSES TO BE

For one thing, this notion of inerrancy is bound to a single-surface view of the text of Scripture. That is to say, the Scriptures are looked upon as having been produced by a single act of inspiration in each author and created by one grand sweep of the sacred author's pen. All of the statements that ours is not a mechanical view of inspiration to the contrary notwithstanding, the average pastor teaches the Bible as though it were inspired just in this way. This way of teaching continues all the way through our prep schools. I make bold to say this because I have seen what a shock it is to our second year men in Hermeneutics to discover that there are, most likely, several layers under the present Biblical documents; namely, those of oral tradition and of other documents.

Such a view makes of the Bible less than what it proposes to be; for the Scriptures are in a real way the book of the people of God, into which has been poured their response to God's mighty acts of revelation. We reduce the sweep of the Biblical account when we fail to consider the activity, for example, of the story-teller in ancient Israel as a source of the materials found in our sacred Scriptures.

Let us take the Book of Judges as an example of this aspect of revelation. How did this book come into being? We do not know who wrote it; nor does that detract from its authority. (This, by the way, is a wholesome principle of our theology: that the authority of a Biblical document does not depend on its author ship). Now, how did this unknown writer go about his task? He has a truth to convey, which certainly came to him by what we would call revelation. The truth was this: Obedience to God assures the prosperity of a nation; idolatry incurs the wrath of God in the form of enemy invasion and occupation; Yahweh, however, is faithful to His covenant and for that reason raises up liberators when people repent. This was his insight into the meaning of the particular historical situation in which Israel found itself. This concern governs the composition of the book. To point up this truth, the author selects the traditional stories about

Israel's heroes that circulated among the people. These stories were believed by the people as the story tellers related them, even though they were embellished in the telling by the kind of hyperbole that is characteristic of this kind of literary genre. What point would there have been, therefore, in checking all the details? For the writer and for his readers these stories were fully true. The author of Judges, therefore, used them as he found them in order to convey a divine truth. The history that results is paradigmatic of God's concern for His people. To insist on the inerrancy of the written account, as though it were a precise and orderly chronicling of events, is to reduce the Scripture to less than what it proposes to be in terms of its origins.

Our usual view of inerrancy, moreover, overlooks one whole side of revelation. It obscures the fact that God revealed Himself primarily in mighty acts. These acts preceded the inspired account that we have of them. The Exodus occurred and Jesus rose from the dead before these acts were recorded. In other words, the revealing acts were there before the report that describes and interprets them for us. These manifestations of power are primary in the sense that historic events were the stuff God used to make known the strength of His arm.

Now, this very fundamental consideration is blurred, if not entirely obliterated, by that view of inerrancy which is concerned almost exclusively with the verbal side of Biblical revelation. As a consequence the unity of the Scriptures is often assumed to consist in little more than a verbal correspondence between certain Old Testament passages and their counterpart in the New Testament. This is the outlook that , insists on almah in Isaiah 7, 14 having to mean "virgin" and nothing less. Now, this approach certainly stunts the message of the Bible. For the unity of the testaments consists in their common description of all the bother God went to in order to re-establish Himself as king over rebellious mankind. Accordingly, the whole of Israel's history and experience, both of God's ancient people and of His church, is embodied in our Lord as the true Israel, standing at the very center of history itself.

Proceeding now to a further consideration of the concept of inerrancy, we need to keep in mind that it is a modern heresy to identify truth with fact. This is one of the consequences of the discovery and wholesale application of the scientific method, as Michael Roberts has shown in his book, The Modern Mind, Behind this identification is a rather materialistic view of truth, which ultimately derives from Aristotle, was mediated through the thought of the Scholastics into early physics and passed from there, through Hobbes, into the rationalistic period of the subsequent age. But the Bible is quite innocent of this tendency and freely speaks of spiritual reality in symbolic terms. We shall return to this point at some length a little later. However, in passing it might be noted that what we mean when we say that language is symbolic is that it relates to its object in a different way from empirical language, which has become the norm in our culture and has raised the question of inerrancy as we confront it. Symbolic language makes the object no less true. On the contrary, such language can often be used to communicate truth more effectively.

Let me illustrate. Each year the planetarium in Chicago announces a lecture on the Christmas Star. In this talk all of the astronomical data that might possibly explain this unusual phenomenon are introduced. It is all very factual; and yet not an ounce of any truth that really matters gets through. Or, let us try another approach in an attempt to point out that a symbolic statement contains more truth than a factual account.

The rabbis attach to Psalm 139,3 ("Thou winnowest my path") this interpretation: At the time a human being is conceived, the angel of conception takes a drop of the human seed and, in response to a divine command, scatters it in 365 parts on the "threshing floor." God then decides the fate of the individual, whether he shall be male or female, weak or strong, poor or rich, short or tall, etc. Our modern scientific jargon would limit itself to a discussion of chromosomes and genes and their more than 16,000,000 possible different combinations. Now, when all is said

and done, which statement conveys the truth that God is our Creator? Certainly not the scientific account dealing with genes and chromosomes. That stops short of the dimension of meaning. In this instance, there is no fact of any kind in the rabbinic story; and yet it conveys a very important truth most effectively.

St. Paul does this very thing in 1 Corinthians 10,1 when he says of the Israelites in the desert, "For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ." Here he uses a rabbinic legend about a rock that followed Israel wherever it wandered. It contains a minimum of fact and yet conveys a significant divine truth. An insistence, therefore, that truth must be factual would have, to believe that there was such a moving rock, even though the Old Testament nowhere describes such a phenomenon.

This illustration, involving the use of a legend, leads us over to our second major consideration, namely, that a determined stand for inerrancy

II. OVERLOOKS THE USE OF LITERARY FORM IN THE PROCESS OF REVELATION

We have something of a parallel here to developments in the field of grammar. The language of the New Testament was once thought to be a specially designed "holy jargon." In fact, a Gutachten from the University of Wittenberg during the seventeenth century boldly declares that there can be no anacolutha or solecisms in the New Testament, because it is divinely inspired. The discovery of the papyri put an end to the view that what we have in the New Testament is a special language of the Holy Ghost. It became only too obvious that the language, used by evangelists and apostles was that of everyday life. We are grateful for what outside sources have contributed to our understanding of individual words and grammatical constructions in the sacred records. We do not hesitate to consult these secular sources and would not dream of insisting that any grammatical question in the New Testament could be answered only in the light of what is contained in the Scriptures themselves.

Much the same sort of thing has occurred in the area of literary forms. Prof.

Pritchard of the University of Pennsylvania has given us a collection of ancient Middle Eastern texts, where we can see how literary forms were used to communicate what other civilizations conceived to be the truth. Why should the literature of Israel be any different from this in form? The contents are unique, to be sure. Yet the forms used to convey the Biblical revelation of Yahweh as the lord of nature and of history differ no more from their extra-Biblical counterparts than the language of the New Testament varies from the koine of its day.

There is, for instance, what we might call the epic form. This tends to exaggerate events. It contains hyperbole in the grand manner. Now, we don't get upset when St. Mark uses hyperbole in his first chapter, where he says about John the Baptizer, "And there went out to him all the country of Judaea, and all the people of Jerusalem." We have sufficient evidence in the other gospels to know that not all of Judaea and not all of the people of Jerusalem went out to hear John. In essence such an exaggeration as you find in Mark is no different from the "beefed up" accounts of the Exodus event. I have in mind particularly the statement that 600,000 Israelites left Egypt all at one time. To insist here on precision in fact is to miss the whole point of the literary form, whose purpose is to magnify God for His great power.

A particularly extreme example of this kind of inaccuracy in another context is found at 2 Chronicles 13,17, where we read, "And Abijah and his people slew them with a great slaughter: so there fell down slain of Israel five hundred thousand chosen men." Now, any one acquainted with what we have of population statistics from the ancient world and any one familiar with sizes of armies in proportion to total populations can only conclude that this is hyperbole of the first magnitude. As a matter of fact, it might almost be put down as a general principle that only occasionally are numbers used with great precision in the Scriptures, even outside apocalyptic literature. For, mind you, this is as many dead as America lost during all of World War II.

Even the years given for the reign of various kings must at times be seen from this side. I owe this particular insight to our own Dr. Mueller, who once pointed out to me that the many references to a forty-year rule ought, most likely, to be understood symbolically. Forty seems to stand for the full complement of years allotted by divine decision to certain kings in Israel.

Now, certainly God could have given us the verbal side of revelation in bald prose. In our day He probably would have. But we do not live in Bible times, when there was no such agonizing concern for precision in fact.

But to proceed! An insistence on the inerrancy of Scripture--and this is my third major point--

III. OVER-SIMPLIFIES THE WHOLE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION

We have already touched upon this matter very briefly. Now, however, we want to spend a little time on certain aspects of the function of language in the process of communication.

We talk about following the line of an argument. This is the linear process of reasoning as expressed, for instance, in algebraic formulas. We use the expression breadth of knowledge when we talk about substance and content in the items of a linear process. But we also use the term depth of thought. Here we are in the area of insight, intuition, revelation. This is where we find the use of poetry, art, the tale, and, if you wish, myth.

The scientific method by definition limits itself to the first two dimensions. Concern for depth is outside its sphere. Science practices a deliberate isolation from the dimension of total existence; its use of language, therefore, is ascetic. An astronomer can gather volumes of data on the movement of heavenly bodies; but his science will not give him the insights of Psalm 19. Now, the question of inerrancy arises only in this two-dimensional view of the world. Life, however, comes in at least three dimensions; and the Scriptural revelation proposes to communicate to the whole of life. Even to raise the question of inerrancy resembles

the efforts of a geometer trying to squeeze a cube into a square.

The third dimension has its own kind of language. This we tend to overlook in our familiarity with it. Yet we should be aware of the fact that since the Renaissance a process of discrimination in language has been under way, and that language becomes more precise as the decades roll by. Before the modern era little thought was given to levels in language. Books on astrology and alchemy from the Middle Ages, for example, make an indiscriminate use of language which can only annoy the scientific mind of our day. Theological, mythical and quasi-scientific language are found in the same paragraph and even in the same sentence although they were all the same in their usage.

We might observe at this point that science did not move ahead until it stripped itself of mythical and even theological language. Astronomy, for example, had to rid itself of the depth factor in order to become the elaborate and detailed science of today. But as such it is always a construct. It does not speak to all of life and existence. It has broken the wholeness of language that we find in Scripture. It resembles the Mercator maps we got used to in our school geographies and believed to be reasonably accurate until the dawn of the air age. Now, the question of inerrancy has validity only in the area of the limited interests of the scientific method. It cannot properly be applied to the depth dimension of life and language.

For that reason Bultmann can quite rightly say that the only historical statement in the Apostles' Creed is the sentence, "He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried." The rest of the Creed uses a different kind of language, from the third dimension of life, from the level of revelation and not necessarily of factuality. This does not mean that Christ did not rise from the dead, or ascend into heaven* But it does imply that you cannot apply the yardstick, of historical language to these professions of our faith; for the evidence

was not revealed to any one outside the circle of Jesus' disciples.

We have a good example of the indiscriminate use of language in the opening verse of Isaiah 6, which says, "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple." The first part is straight factual language; to it the measure of inerrancy can be applied. The rest of the verse, however, defies such measurement. It describes an experience in depth, in the dimension of divine revelation.

Add to this the fact that our Western way of thinking is quite different from that of the Oriental mind. We like to measure all things by the yardstick of our intellect and make a fetish of material fact. The Oriental, on the contrary, has a concrete, living and existentialist notion of truth. Truth for him is not the clearly defined idea, the logical sequence of thought, or the accurately measured report. For him truth is a matter of life. It consists in the uprightness of a living relationship between persons, a matter to which both the Hebrew emeth and the Biblical use of aleetheia bear ample testimony.

We ask, therefore, how does one communicate the truth to people who, unlike us, are concerned with the concrete, with the whole of existence? Not by factual precision, not by statements that must of necessity be inerrant, but by the kind of language that is derived from the third dimension of life. To this is sometimes applied the term "myth," whereby man perceives the dramatic character of his situation in existence. Applying this to the Biblical revelation, it is that concrete language which appertains to our personal relationship with God, Who seeks to communicate Himself to us.

The Biblical revelation is given on an "I-Thou" basis, to borrow an expression from Martin Buber. What we have in the Bible is not only information about God but a communication of God Himself to us in a dramatic situation calling for our response. This is inherent in both the Hebrew and the Greek terms used for knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ, Whom He has sent.

To talk about inerrancy in this kind of communication is to reduce the Bible to less than it proposes to be. In fact, the question has come up only because revelation itself has often been understood as meaning no more than the disclosure of right propositions about God.

All this has some very practical import for our own task of communicating God's revelation to our generation. One of the first tasks we face when we are dealing with a secular man is to persuade him that there is a level of life beyond factual and verifiable data. It is just this, that makes the preaching of the Gospel more difficult today than ever before. This is why Christian education is a more crucial need today than in previous generations; for the very kind of language and literature in which Biblical truth comes to us from God via the Scriptures is unfamiliar to the man of the twentieth century. He does not have the intellectual structure to which divine truth can direct itself and be understood. In a way, this is my greatest practical concern in this whole discussion on inerrancy. For the question is strictly a diversion. I don't want our graduates to be fighting the battles of God on the wrong fronts. And that's what happens when we fail to make the distinctions in language suggested in this paper.

Let us illustrate the language of truth from the Scriptures. The greatest of God's ancient acts was surely the Exodus. In fact, the whole Old Testament has to be read from this point of view—even backwards toward Genesis. What we seem to have in Genesis are those strands of history which bear out the truth that the God of Israel is also the Lord of the world.

But these events in history—the saving of Noah, the choice of Abraham, and the rest of it—as we read of them in our Scriptures meet us in forms that were, quite possibly, fixed in the process of oral transmission. And so these accounts have an epic and even legendary flavor. They propose to communicate truth by using these particular literary vehicles.

Beyond Noah are the accounts of creation and the fall. What shall we make of

them? This is the area, I would suggest, where the dimension of the symbolic (or mythical, if you wish) bulks large. We may view these accounts in four different ways:

1. By clinging to the factual character of the story, in spite of all difficulties, which are even greater than those that attach to the story of Joshua making the sun and the moon to stand still.
2. To call it a "myth" in the sense of the liberals, who dismissed the whole story as patently untrue.
3. To say that the story is a true and inspired "parable" of man's actual condition. This is the way of neo-orthodoxy.
4. To say that it describes the historical truth, and that the writer intended it to do just that. He wrote it as a tale, as a poetic piece, to set forth the truth of that which he believed to have happened, using materials available to him from storytellers or from written documents. That is to say, these accounts propose to speak of real events describing man's creation and fall as well as 'the making of his world, but in language that is largely symbolical, or mythical, and is to be so understood—even as Luther saw that God's "right hand" really means "everywhere."

As for myself I am committed to this last view, because it alone seems to ring true to the Biblical process of revelation as consisting of God communicating of Himself to us in our total being and existence. In fact, I would view the first approach—the literalistic one—as an exceedingly subtle stratagem sometimes employed by the Evil One to get us out on detours such as, "Where did the light come from on the first three days? Were the days really twenty-four hour days?" For if we can be kept busy with that kind of question, we can escape the need for facing up to the claims of God as our Creator.

According to this fourth option, Israel must be viewed in a very profound sense as the instrument of God's ancient revelation. For it was there that these truths were made known by means of the literary forms suggested and in the kind of language we have discussed. This means that what we have in the Biblical accounts of the Old Testament is a description of Israel's faith and the inspired testimony to its truthfulness. This is surely the meaning of the Psalm, "He made

known his ways unto Moses, his acts unto the children of Israel." (Psalm 103,7) If this should bother us, let me point to the fact that the Gospels in the New Testament are documents of the same kind. Their very form bears witness to the faith of the respective evangelist and of the church.

This is one of the factors to be reckoned with in accounting for the differences in the structure of the four gospel accounts. The evangelists did not propose to write a life of Jesus. They set out to present Him as the Messiah, each from his own point of view. Each one chose to use those materials that best served this over-arching purpose and in a way that most effectively presented the case. For Matthew, Jesus is the great fulfiller of the Old Testament. He is the Son of Man in Mark. Luke describes Him as the universal Savior, and John presents Him as the Logos. What they tell us is nothing less than God's truth. But that truth comes to us not just in bald prose or in essay form. It is revealed in the diverse language of total existence and in the literary forms best adapted to convey truth to the men of a former age.

Now, one might ask at this point, Where does all this stop? Where can we draw the line? In the first place, we must repeat that the Scriptures themselves know of no such line. It is we, of our age, who clamor for a precise rule of thumb. To meet that cry, let us say, first of all, that we can, in our own categories, distinguish between facts that matter and those that do not. To Matthew 27,9—the reference to Jeremiah rather than to Zechariah—Luther says, "What does it matter if he (Matthew) does not give the name exactly?" The same could be said of the reference to Abiathar, rather than Abimelech, at Mark 2,26.

But it does matter whether there was or was not an Exodus or a resurrection. The existence of Israel and of the church provides one kind of evidence for both events. And I am wondering whether Luther himself hasn't provided us with a clue to this difficult side of our problem by insisting on a Christological principle of interpretation. Christ is the punctus mathematicus sacrae Scripturae. (W.A. Tr.

2. 439 [2383])). All Scriptures turn about Him as their true center. In actual execution the principle would need to be enlarged to include the story of Israel as prefiguring the life, experience, suffering and death of our Lord as the true Israel.

Hermeneutically speaking, most of what we have tried to say means, as Dr. Franzmann keeps on reminding us in other contexts, that in order to understand the Scriptures we do not bring the documents to us, we go back to the records to see them in the light of the times in which they were written. If we do this we shall discover that the question of inerrancy is quite out of keeping with the nature of Biblical revelation. What is more, we shall experience the exhilaration that comes from being delivered from the chains of an unnecessary obscurantism. Deus nobis iuvat!

Prepared for a faculty discussion on February 25, 1958.